

## Past and Present

# Champion of the Helpless in Our Midst

Reluctant U.S. politicians in the nineteenth century were cajoled and at times browbeaten into recognizing their obligations to care for the mentally ill by a woman who, beneath an appearance of genteel fragility, concealed an indefatigable energy,

an unshakable resolve, and a mastery of political infighting. In the years leading up to the Civil War, the political arena—shrouded in cigar smoke, resounding with theatrical oratory and off-the-record profanity—was regarded as no place for a

lady, certainly not the prim, righteous, sharp-tongued lobbyist Dorothea Lynde Dix.

At a time when woman suffrage was not even on the horizon and when politics was a well-guarded male domain, Dorothea Dix triumphed against those who saw a dire precedent if the federal government were to appropriate money for care of the insane. If the national government were to shoulder the burden of the mentally ill, they asked, why not all the ill and, indeed, why not the hungry as well? Moreover, would not such a theory of federal responsibility



The archetypal warehouse for the insane was depicted in William Hogarth's "Bedlam," the name by which London's Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem was popularly known.

Although this scene is clearly eighteenth-century English (note the seal on the wall), its equivalent or worse persisted in nineteenth-century America.

infringe upon the rights of the sovereign states and unfairly deprive the rich of privately indulging their charitable impulses?

Against this array of principled and unprincipled obstruction, Dorothea Dix succeeded in establishing 32 state hospitals for the insane. She was stopped only by a presidential veto from setting up a federal system for properly funding such hospitals around the country. In exposing the abuse of the mentally ill, she traveled over barely passable trails and swollen rivers to reach chained and tortured mental patients from the American West, to the hills of Scotland, to the shores of the Bosphorus, laying their case before the conscience of the world. When war came, she was commissioned superintendent of nurses with the rank of major general in the Union Army.

Dorothea Dix was in many ways a woman of her time—fiercely principled, mistrusting all that is easy in life, and passionately devoted to its rigors. She might have been a conventional lady, given to piety and genteel good works, if she had not grown up with bizarre parents in the backwoods of Maine. She often observed that she had reached adulthood without ever knowing what it was to be a child.

The town of Hampden, Me., lies about six miles down the Penobscot River from Bangor. Not far from town is an archway marking the entrance to what is now called Dorothea Dix Park. But in 1802, when Dorothea was born on that site, it was a farm considered by the neighbors to be pathetically mismanaged.

Her father, Joseph Dix, had been a promising student of

theology at Harvard when he seemed to court his own ruin. He married—a step that would have risked his expulsion from Harvard even if his bride had been highborn, well connected, and rich. But aggravating his offense was the fact that the woman he chose was Mary Bigelow, 18 years older than he was, with no discernible talent and of an impoverished family in Sudbury, a village well outside Boston's world of intellectual and spiritual refinement or commercial enterprise.

Moreover, Joseph departed from the respectable Congregational faith of his parents, which confined religion largely to Sunday morning services. Instead, the young man, still in his 20s, felt the urgent need to preach day in and day out on hellfire and damnation decreed by an implacable God.

Such "fanatical Methodism" was unpalatable to his mother, Dorothy Lynde Dix, a woman with a circumscribed view of proper Christian duties. Francis Tiffany, a nineteenth-century biographer of the Dix family, noted that she was one of that breed of Puritan mothers "unflinchingly nerved, if need be, to die at the stake for their children but whom no thought of penal fires would have betrayed into the weakness of kissing them goodnight."

Dorothy Lynde was 25 when she married Dr. Elijah Dix, one year older and at least as flinty as her. He had come to the medical profession not by way of college but by apprenticeship. Enterprising to the point of aggressiveness, he acquired property not only in Massachusetts but also in the backwoods of Maine. When his son, Joseph, made a mess of his career at Harvard, the canny doctor sent

him to Maine in a move that served many purposes. Joseph, with his wild-eyed religion and his excruciatingly embarrassing wife, could thus be exiled and at the same time be usefully employed in finding settlers to farm the doctor's properties in the hinterland.

Joseph, however, was scarcely worth his keep as a farm manager or as a recruiter of tenant farmers. His heart was not in the work, even though it offered a livelihood for his growing family, which now included Dorothea and a son, Joseph, born in 1807. Another son, Charles Wesley, would be born in 1812, but by then the troubled father had abandoned the farm. Joseph senior devoted most of his attention to writing leaflets and pamphlets full of dire warnings of the coming doom.

In 1807, Elijah died, and his son, Joseph, was in effect emancipated from his responsibilities for the Maine properties. He tried his hand at selling books and plying other trades, but all ended in commercial disaster. The family spent the years of the War of 1812 in a wagon traveling the rutted roads of Vermont and New Hampshire, an itinerant pulpit for Joseph's religious mission.

Dorothea made her escape from drudgery and disorder in 1814, when she was 12 years old. Early one morning, when her father was away preaching, she blew a goodbye kiss to her sleeping mother and brothers and boarded the stagecoach for Boston. When she turned up on her grandmother's doorstep, that formidable woman was impressed with the young girl's pluck.

Dorothea so welcomed the release from responsibility that she learned to love her grand-

mother's Spartan discipline and insistence on decorum. In contrast to her father's extravagant displays when he was seized with the spirit, restraint seemed more a liberation than a confinement. Each day, the family coachman drove Dorothea to school, where she was to acquire the polish to be expected from a daughter of the Dixes.

She nevertheless relished the respite from her grandmother's unbending rules in occasional visits to her relatives in Worcester, Mass., particularly to her handsome cousin Edward Dillingham Bangs, then 28. Though twice Dorothea's age, he would listen respectfully to her views on art, literature, science, and theology. When she confessed to Edward that she wanted to teach—not as some long-range ambition but even while she herself was still at school—he persuaded the family to give their indispensable assent.

Her brother Joseph was brought down from Maine to begin his education but needed special tutoring sessions with his sister to bring him up to the level of his classmates. Along with her tender ministrations, Joseph had to accept even tougher discipline to demonstrate Dorothea's belief in even-handed justice.

Dorothea's budding career as a teacher and her promising flirtation with Edward were interrupted in 1820 when her grandmother ordered her home to Boston. At 17, Dorothea was attractive, but unlike the early nineteenth-century female paradigm, she was also very serious and determined. She was a teacher, she told her grandmother, and she wanted to teach.

Children were not then eligible to enter a Boston public school if they did not know how



**The daughter of a hellfire-and-brimstone preacher, Dorothea Dix devoted her life to service of a merciful God. She was drawn first to teaching and then to the reforms of the Social Gospel. Her abiding cause was care for the mentally ill, for whom she helped establish 32 hospitals in the United States.**

to read. Moreover, eligible girls were admitted only in the spring and summer, when boys were needed on the farm. There was thus an evident need for a school such as Dorothea's to supplement such limited education.

Although Dorothea began in one of the outbuildings on the Dix estate, her success soon won her grandmother's permission to use part of the old mansion. Her younger brother, Charles, had now joined his siblings under their grandmother's wing, safe from the influence of their fanatical father and inadequate mother.

Dorothea's life, however busy, was narrowed by her grandmother's constraints until one Sunday when the young teacher went to a church on Federal

Street that had become the talk of Boston. It was presided over by a pale little man who was altogether unprepossessing until he began to speak. Then his voice, his eyes, and his ideas held his audience spellbound. Dorothea was quickly won over. The minister was William Ellery Channing, whose God was not the embodiment of unrelenting justice and merciless retribution but an expression of love and mercy. Moreover, he incessantly called the attention of his congregation to Boston's poor, to the misery of the city's factories (where children worked long hours alongside their parents), to the conditions of slaves and the few freedmen (who still lived in fear and poverty), and to the poor, exploited immigrant Irish (who did the



rough and dirty work that kept Boston in high style).

Unfortunately, Dorothea's view of herself did not quite jibe with the picture of the perfect wife that had captured the fancy of Edward Bangs. When Dorothea confided to him her passion for teaching, her concern for the poor, and her admiration for the unconventional Channing, Edward registered his disapproval. He made it clear that once they were married, she would be performing the proper function of a woman: bearing and raising her children while ornamenting the life of her husband.

Dorothea wrote to him that if he indeed insisted on so limited a definition of a woman, he might look elsewhere for a wife. With breathtaking alacrity, he married a woman from Worcester. There followed a successful family life and a political career in which he became Secretary of State for Massachusetts. He died at the age of 50.

That brush with conventional matrimony was as close as Dorothea Dix would ever come to it in a life passionately committed to work. She taught an evening class for young men and women who worked during the day. She opened a school in the Charlestown navy yard for the cabin boys of the merchant marine. She participated in the causes espoused by Channing's Unitarian Church, from crusades to improve housing for the poor to the abolition of slavery, though she disapproved of those abolitionists who counseled violence.

The questions asked by her pupils provided material for her first book, *Conversations on Common Things*. In simple conversations between a fictional mother and child, she explained how clocks worked, how salt was made, how banks operated,

the principal factors in the determination of weather, and other aspects of a child's world. She discussed the lives of animals, the cultivation of crops, and the machinery in cotton mills.

The book came out in 1824 and was still selling in 1869. The royalties, she directed, were to be sent to her mother. Her father had died in 1821, leaving his widow without resources. Dorothea followed up the success of her *Conversations* with two other books, *Evening Hours* and *Hymns for Children*, which soon became standard items in schools and homes. Some of the hymns were venerable standbys, but others were written by Dorothea. She had a foretaste of triumph when she caught her grandmother on the verge of a compliment. She wrote to a friend:

Grandmother, who is never ready to give me credit for solidity and seriousness of feeling, read one of my hymns. She said something in its favor; then, discovering it was my writing, was sorry.

Dorothea was now no longer dependent on the bounty of her grandmother or other relatives. The income from her teaching and writing had made her independent, and when she had to rest, she wrote uplifting fiction for respectable magazines. These were reprinted in book form as *American Moral Tales for Young Persons*. The stories managed to be entertaining despite the author's insistence on pointing out the moral of every triumph of virtue, every defeat of villainy. There were few subtleties, and the stories were peopled by stock characters; but the dialogue was believable, and there was heroic action in the

homey battles between good and evil.

She also wrote *A Garland of Flora*, an exhaustive description of familiar flowers, complete with Latin nomenclature, historical anecdotes, and a plethora of quotations referring poetically to each flower. (Tributes to the rose alone took up 18 pages.) She also produced an anthology of religious reflections—two each for every day of the week—offering her own quiet meditations for morning and evening. *Meditations for Private Hours*, she called the work, and it, too, became popular for its attractive style and impeccable moral tone.

Her compulsion to work brought on repeated collapses, in which she spat blood and reluctantly yielded to incapacitating weakness (she apparently had pulmonary tuberculosis). In 1836, when she was 34, her doctors prescribed the most fashionable cure for the genteel: a long ocean voyage. Armed with letters of introduction from Channing to congenial people in England and escorted by solicitous friends, she boarded a ship in New York bound for Liverpool. The bracing sea air, however, performed no miracles; she was forced by frequent hemorrhaging to stay in her cabin.

She barely managed to book herself into a hotel and sent a letter to one of Channing's friends, William Rathbone. He rushed to her aid and insisted on whisking her off to his estate, called Greenbank, some three miles out of town. There, surrounded by the Rathbones' large and loving family, she was waited on, nursed, amused, and shielded from every temptation to fulfill a Puritan duty.

Although the Rathbones coddled Dorothea physically, they

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exercised her mind and widened her intellectual horizons. Their home was a crossroads where reformers of all gradations—utopian socialists, abolitionists, temperance leaders, theological innovators, and pacifists—met, conferred, and planned their campaigns to save humanity from itself. The Rathbones themselves were energetic Quakers. One of the Greenbank set who was to have a major influence on Dorothea was Samuel Tuke, who, following the lead of Philippe Pinel when he struck off the chains of France's mentally ill (see Elmer Bendiner, "Philippe Pinel: Reason for the Unreasoning," *HP*, June 1981), had set up his Retreat at York, where the

"mad" were treated as patients, not prisoners.

Dorothea's health improved, and by autumn she could walk about her room. By winter she was allowed to go downstairs, and as spring came, marking the passage of almost a year since she had landed in Liverpool, she could venture out on country walks. Then her grandmother, at the age of 91 and feeling time running out, asked Dorothea to come home. Dorothea agreed but put off her departure until one day, in June 1831, she was notified that Grandmother Dix had died in April.

In the fall she went home to Massachusetts and found that her grandmother had left her an inheritance that could keep her in modest style for the rest of her life. Her brothers were

grown and independent. Charles was off on an expedition to Africa, and Joseph was a businessman. Dorothea resumed her teaching and writing, but the years seemed to stretch ahead of her down a lonely road. The death of Edward Dillingham Bangs in 1838 seemed to close off her past with devastating finality.

In the spring of 1841, a young divinity student at Harvard came to Dorothea with a problem. He had agreed to conduct a Sunday school at a jail in East Cambridge but found that his class was composed of 20 women, all older than he was. He did not feel up to the job and had come, at his mother's suggestion, to ask Dorothea to recommend a mature woman to take over the group. On im-



Dorothea Dix followed the path of Philippe Pinel, who in the wake of the French Revolution, overturned the medieval practice of institutional confinement of the insane in

shackles and filth. In an engraving after a painting by Robert-Fleury, Pinel is shown among mental patients in the courtyard of La Salpêtrière, a penal institution for women.

pulse, Dorothea volunteered to run the class herself.

Accordingly, on a cold March day she found herself telling the story of Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute, to a group of female prisoners, many of whom had been whores, thieves, or drunks. She treated them with the same politeness usually reserved for ladies at church socials. At the lesson's end, she heard a wild screech. The jailer explained that it was one of the insane inmates who were kept in jail because they could not afford lodging in an asylum.

The screeching man was one of many huddled on filthy straw in cells that were always cold and damp. The jailer explained that there was no need to give them blankets because it was a well-known fact that mad people could not tell the difference between hot and cold. Dorothea went from cell to cell and found men and women in rags, some in chains and some cowering in corners.

She described the subhuman conditions in which the mentally ill were housed to the East Cambridge Court. Realizing that for a woman to appear in court was scandalous, she wrote a memorial (memorandum) outlining the appalling conditions in which the "mad" people were kept. She won from the authorities a grudging agreement to install stoves in the cells for use in hard winters, but they would go no further than that. The newspapers picked up the story but saw far more scandal and sensation in the shocking interference by a woman in town affairs than in any revelation she put before the court.

Dorothea felt the stirrings of fresh indignation. William Channing had grown too old

and ill to join her in this crusade, but he steered her to the great Bostonian reformers Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe (the educator who had fought for the liberation of Greece from Turkish rule, as had Byron, and had come back to Boston, eager to champion causes closer to home). Dorothea persuaded other prominent clergymen and educators to join her in visiting the jails where the mentally ill were kept. They found in Boston's prisons and almshouses innocent men, women, and children bearing the stigma of madness and condemned to unspeakable humiliations and privations, with no end to their sentences save death.

Dorothea took to the road, and in town after town she found people who were called mad reduced to skeletons, chained, "beaten, with rods and lashed into obedience" (as she wrote), often sold to families as cheap household or farm labor. When they became intractable, they could be returned to a filthy cell or chained to a wall.

Her tour of Massachusetts jails was exhaustive and exhausting. Channing had died in the autumn of 1842 while Dorothea was rattling along the roads of Massachusetts in stagecoaches, buggies, and farm wagons. At the suggestion of Channing's widow, Dorothea moved into the clergyman's study and there drafted another memorial, this time to the state legislature. She noted that in the cause that moved her, she had surrendered her "habitual views of what is womanly and becoming" and hoped "that the memorialist will be forgotten in the memorial." That document, reporting horrors from town after town, shook

the conscience of Massachusetts when Samuel Gridley Howe transmitted it to the legislature.

In the end Dorothea's report carried the day. The legislative committee endorsed the memorial and proposed accommodations for 200 additional patients (a modest proposal, since even with the increase there would be beds for fewer than 500 of the estimated 1,700 in the state who required such hospitalization).

Still, the passage of that bill, inadequate as it was, became the first of a long series of Dorothea Dix's politicomedical victories. Politicians and reporters rightly credited this meddlesome middle-aged woman with a significant breakthrough.

From Massachusetts she carried the crusade to Rhode Island. The crisp telegraphic sentences of her diary tell the story of her subsequent journeys through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New Jersey:

Stage for Gettysburg, saw jail....  
Stage for Bedford, 13½ hours  
hard riding. Poor horse. Set off a  
little past midnight to cross  
mountains, reached the top of  
Alleghenies at daylight. Wagon  
to Somerset....

She occasionally had to switch to river rafts or saddle horses. Even the loss of her brother Charles on a ship that foundered off the African coast scarcely brought a pause in her work.

In 1845, she drafted her "Memorial Soliciting a State Hospital for the Insane" in New Jersey, the first of its kind in the state. "Be patient with me," she wrote.

It is for your own citizens I  
plead; it is for helpless, friend-  
less men and women, in your  
very midst, I ask succour...the



foul air of whose dreary cells still oppresses my breath, the clanking of whose heavy chains still sounds upon my ear. Have pity upon them! Have pity upon them!

She went over her list of legislators, noting the sympathetic, the hostile, and the doubtful. Forbidden by custom from lobbying legislators in their offices or their homes, she had her friends set aside the corner of a library, and there she would sit while politicians came singly or in pairs to hear her plea.

Occasionally, she would arrange for a dozen or more legislators to come en masse for a lecture in the parlor of her rooming house. The sessions frequently ran until well after midnight. To many she introduced for the first time the enlightened medical view of insanity, citing Pinel and Tuke among others. When, in 1845, the bill was passed appropriating money for an asylum at Trenton, Dorothea was asked to advise on the site, style, and furnishings.

Tirelessly she went on to fight for the establishment of state hospitals for the insane in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, and Tennessee and throughout the Deep South. Almost as a by-product of those campaigns was her plea for softening the harsh regimes of U.S. prisons and for separating juvenile offenders from hardened criminals, summed up in a slim but powerful book, *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline*.

In three years—from 1842 to 1845—she traveled 10,000 miles and visited the institutionalized "mad" in some 700 jails, almshouses, and hospitals in more than 400 cities and towns. She resisted all appeals to slow



"Idiot" strapped into a chair typifies the conditions Dorothea Dix found in local U.S. jails, where insane inmates were incarcerated if relatives could not pay for their lodging in an asylum. (Engraving by E. Esquirol, Paris, 1838)

down, and by 1848, she had clocked 60,000 miles and seen 9,000 men, women, and children duly certified as "mad" and as such generally abused.

After six years of such crusading, Dorothea conceived of an ambitious scheme. The problem of the mentally ill was a national one, she reasoned. Out of a total population of more than 17 million, some 17,400 were thought to require institutionalization as mentally ill,

but the total number of hospital beds available for these patients was estimated to be 2,500. (These figures were for whites only, since slaves and Native Americans, whatever their states of health, were not counted.) The national government, which owned enormous tracts of land, had sold portions of it to provide funds for public improvements. Would it not be possible, she suggested, to sell 5 million acres of public land to establish

a perpetual fund for the care of the country's mentally ill? The scheme was not so wildly ambitious, she told friends. After all, the government had an estimated billion acres at its disposal.

She set up her campaign headquarters in a corner of the Capitol library. All through that muggy summer she followed her routine of rising at 5:00, breakfasting at her rooming house, joining her host's family at prayers, then knitting and reading the papers until 10:00, when she took up her post in the library and waited for friends to bring wavering congressmen for indoctrination on the land-grant bill. She held her interviews until 3:00 in the afternoon, when she returned to

her lodgings to write for the papers until suppertime.

Medical associations rallied to her cause, and support seemed to be growing daily in the Senate. When the debate languished, she went south to campaign for local legislation to fund state hospitals. Slowly and painfully, the land-grant bill encountered one legislative snag after another through all of 1848 and the rest of James Knox Polk's term. Although Polk had presided over the Mexican War—that exercise in fulfillment of Manifest Destiny—Dorothea considered him a friend and felt she could rely on him to sign her bill into law if Congress ever passed it.

An early practitioner of single-issue politics, she also

claimed personal friendship with Millard Fillmore. When he took office in 1850, after Zachary Taylor died of cholera morbus, Fillmore was not yet a member of the ferociously anti-Catholic Know-Nothings, although he would later join them. He became an ardent supporter of Dorothea Dix and all her works.

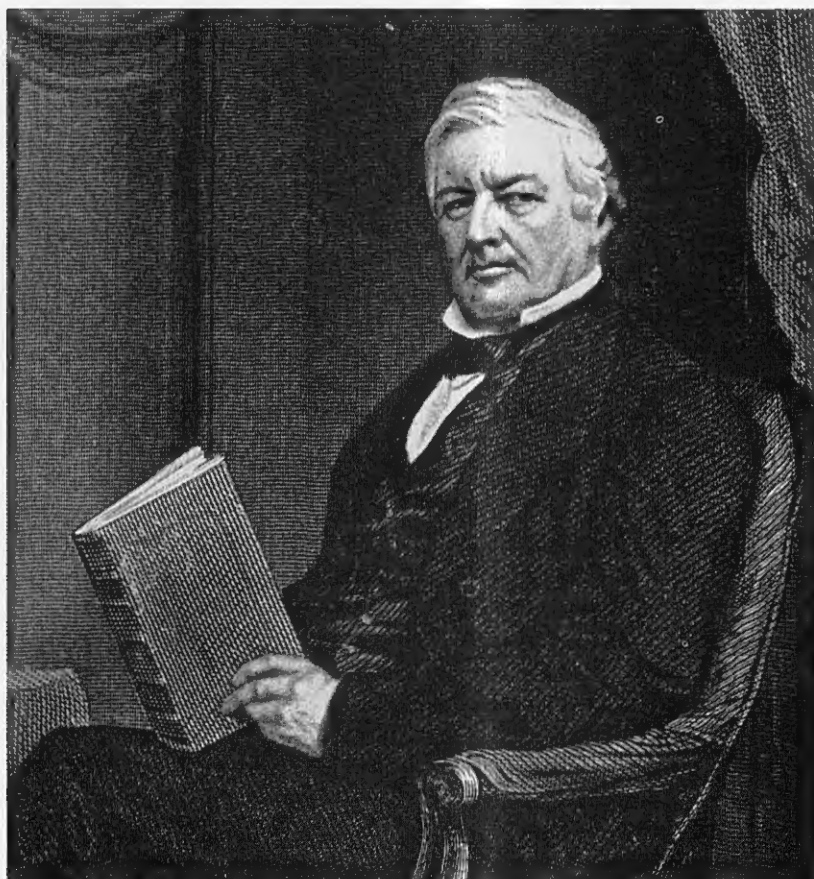
Her bill was debated, pigeonholed, revived, tabled, and referred to committees for more than five years. When Dorothea was not at her post in the library or paying obligatory social calls at the White House or in the homes of congressional leaders, she was on the road, gathering material, pressing for state legislation, or rallying her forces.

In 1853, the President was Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire, like Millard Fillmore a weak president and a doughface (the epithet coined to describe a Northern politician with a conspicuously Southern view on slavery). And like Fillmore, Pierce fell under the sway of Dorothea Dix's charm, integrity, and overpowering conviction, but, as she confided to Fillmore, she was uneasy about the durability of Pierce's support.

That worry dogged her even in the hour of her greatest triumph. On March 9, 1853, the Senate passed Dorothea's bill by more than a two-thirds majority. The House quickly followed with a comfortable—though not two-thirds—majority for the measure. Congratulations poured in from reformers in all parts of the country, whom she answered with exultant Biblical quotations: "The Lord doth build up Jerusalem.... My cup runneth over."

Then came the crushing news

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New York Whig Millard Fillmore, who became president in 1850 when Zachary Taylor died of cholera morbus, was a supporter of Dorothea Dix's effort to establish a national fund for the care of the mentally ill.



that Dorothea had long feared: Pierce's veto. The President applauded the high purpose of the bill but noted that while it was proper to make land grants that would benefit a railroad or a college, it would set a fateful precedent to do so much for poor people who were ill, lest the healthy poor ask for help as well:

If Congress have power to make provision for the indigent insane..., it has the same power to provide for the indigent who are not insane, and thus to transfer to the federal government the charge of all the poor in all the states.

Efforts to override the veto raged in both houses throughout the spring. The debate was impassioned and bitter, as exemplified by Vermont's Senator Solomon Foot, who declared:

Millions for speculation and monopoly, not one dollar for benevolence and humanity is the practical maxim which rules in the high places of power in our day.

Dorothea counted noses again and again, sought to stiffen the backbone of the waverers, and searched among the President's men for possible converts, but she noted in a bitter letter to a friend in Boston, "I cannot bribe or threaten."

As the vote neared in the first week of July, her support melted away. When the tally came, even Senator Foot—who had spoken out so scathingly in the debate—was absent, as were others. In the end, far from commanding the two thirds needed to override the President, the measure could not even



In 1853, President Franklin Pierce, whose support Dorothea Dix had suspected to be dubious, vetoed a congressional bill that would have realized her dream of federally funded care for the mentally ill. To so provide, he argued, would mean that Congress might provide for all poor people in the country. After this bitter defeat, she wrote of her former ally, "Poor man!"

muster a majority. Still, Dorothea had the spirit to write:

I would certainly not exchange either mental, moral, or social state with the President. Poor man!

Abandoned and defeated, she fled to the haven she so fondly remembered—Greenbank, near Liverpool, the pleasant home of the Rathbones, who once before had wrapped her in comfort when she was wracked by physical ills. Then she had been no more than an unknown admirer

and friend of Rev. William Ellery Channing. Now she was a world celebrity in her own right, but she had been dealt a bitter blow and needed a subtler cure.

Her admirers soon clamored for her attention with invitations, expeditions, conferences. She again toured hospitals for the insane, prisons, and poor-houses. She reveled in the Quaker peace and the enlightened spirit of Dr. Daniel Hack Tuke at the celebrated Retreat near York, the model facility for the mentally ill founded by his father, Samuel Tuke. She took

up the cudgels for the scandalously misused "mad" people of Scotland, exposing shocking conditions, lobbying, demanding, pleading with the Lord Advocate of England, the Lord Chancellor, the queen's physician, and parliamentary powers—much as she had done in Congress.

She sparked investigations, appropriations, and press campaigns. Her name alone summoned up allies and prodded sluggish politicians into activity. She brought about lasting reforms in Scotland. She forced the governor of the Channel Islands to end the insanity trade in Jersey and Guernsey. Unscrupulous entrepreneurs could

evade the laws of England, which now granted some protection to mentally ill patients, by opening up inadequate facilities in these more or less autonomous islands where English communities could warehouse their "insane" under appalling conditions but free of the expenses necessary to comply with English law.

Dorothea went with the Rathbones to Switzerland but left her Alpine idyll to study care of the insane in France, Italy, Germany, Norway, Holland, Greece, Russia, and Turkey. Horrified by the hospitals of Rome, this pious daughter of the Puritans went to see Pope Plus IX.

"And did thee really kneel and kiss his hand?" asked a Quaker friend of hers, for whom the Pontiff was no fit company for a Protestant heroine. "I most certainly did," said Dorothea, who always aimed straight at her objective. She added by way of apology and explanation: "I revered him for his saintliness." In any case, the Pope credited her with spurring the Vatican bureaucracy to study the hospitals she recommended in France and to build one along similar lines in Rome as an example for Italy.

Dorothea had kept in touch with U.S. events, hastening, as they were, toward the unspeakable disaster of civil war. Hurrying home, she landed in New York on December 26, 1856, and promptly resumed her campaigning, aware now that not only politicians but also coachmen and ferrymen knew her on sight and cheered her. Years later, on the eve of civil war, she was informed by one of her acquaintances of the road (whose name she was never to reveal) of a plot to assassinate Lincoln as he rode to his inauguration on the Philadelphia and Baltimore Railroad. She barged into the office of the president of the line to warn him of the plot. Later the railroad executive wrote to her asking for "consent to my making known to several parties the fact that you were the first to give the alarm."

When, in the spring of 1861, South Carolina's shore batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter while the belles of Charleston ranged themselves along the waterfront to cheer the gunners, Dorothea hurried to Washington, passing through the streets of Baltimore while pro-Confederate mobs were still rampaging. At the War Department she

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At the outbreak of civil war, Dorothea Dix offered to organize an army nursing corps of female volunteers. She found the army's hospitals—including field hospitals, such as this one—in appalling shape. There were shortages of surgeons, assistants, nurses, and, on occasion, even ambulances.



proposed to the surgeon general that female volunteers be organized into an army nursing corps and offered herself as organizer. Her offer was instantly and enthusiastically accepted by the War Department and approved by President Lincoln.

She threw herself into the job at once, although it was to be two months before she received her formal commission as the nation's first Superintendent of United States Army Nurses, with the rank and privileges of a major general. She had the strength and disposition to pull that rank when necessary.

She found the army's hospitals in appalling shape. In the entire system there were only 30 surgeons and 83 assistants, a staff that would be reduced to 27 surgeons and 62 assistants by defections to the Confederates in the first few months of war. There were scarcely any trained nurses in the entire country.

Women did sign up, but Dorothea set rigid requirements designed to discourage the enlistment of soldiers' sweethearts and wives as well as camp followers. "No woman under 30 need apply," she ruled. Furthermore, her regulations stipulated: "All nurses are required to be plain looking women. Their dresses must be brown or black with no bows, no curls, no jewelry, and no hoop-skirts." She later modified her objections to attractive candidates but stuck to her guns on the age limitation, sure that any woman under 30 would run an unacceptable risk.

Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to earn an American M.D. degree (see Elmer Bendiner, "Elizabeth Blackwell:



Elizabeth Blackwell (left), the first woman to earn an American M.D. degree, helped Dorothea Dix to set up a training course for nurse volunteers, but she resented taking orders from "General" Dix. Young Louisa May Alcott (right) volunteered her services, but her military tour was cut short by illness. To her, Dorothea Dix was "our Florence Nightingale."

'Heresy With Intelligence,' HP, June 1980), helped Dorothea set up a two-month training course for nurse volunteers in New York City hospitals. Before the war's end, however, she was to bridle at taking orders from Dorothea.

Others, like Clara Barton, who was holding a job in the Patent Office in Washington when the war broke out, worked outside the army to help organize medical supplies for military hospitals and offered her nursing skill as well. (In the postwar years she would organize the American Red Cross and pro-

mote U.S. compliance with the international convention on treatment of the war wounded.)

Among the nursing stars of the "respectable" age preferred by Dorothea was the celebrated Mary Ann Bickerdyke (known by the troops as Mother Bickerdyke or "the cyclone in calico"). She was assigned to serve on warships, in field hospitals, and on battlefields, including Gettysburg.

Dorothea did what she could in a wartime capital, pressed by waves of badly wounded men brought from the shifting battlefronts. The city itself was





Dorothea Dix's "first-born"—the first state hospital for the mentally ill that she helped to found, in Trenton, N.J.—was her adopted home in the last years of her peripatetic life. In her apartment there, she died at age 85.

mired in filth, with an ever-present stench emanating from manure piles in the street and an overtaxed sewage system. Typhoid, dysentery, malaria, and sometimes smallpox bedeviled the nurses' best efforts to care for their patients. Dorothea begged, pleaded, and cajoled officials to release funds for vegetables, dried fruits, and jams to prevent scurvy.

When she found that there were few ambulances in the war zones or the capital, she bought at least one with her own money. She ordered commanding officers to stop immediately the practice of appropriating condiments meant for patients to make the officers' mess more palatable. In one hospital she found that the surgeon in command had ordered three convalescent soldiers strung up by their thumbs for a disciplinary infraction. She ordered them released, drawing on her authority as a major general.

Dorothea gratefully accepted Louisa May Alcott as a nurse, although she was far from plain. The young nurse lasted some six weeks before she came down

with either pneumonia or diphtheria. Her impression of Dorothea was vastly different from the picture of the grim-faced tyrant drawn by her critics. Reporting on Dorothea's ministrations, the author wrote:

Daily our Florence Nightingale climbed the steep stairs, stealing a moment from her busy life to watch over the stranger, of whom she was as thoughtfully tender as any mother.

As the war dragged on, the officers who resented so energetic and intrusive a woman trimmed her down to size, limiting her authority to appoint nurses and otherwise hemming her in. She knew that the pressures of her job and the duties to command had undermined the kindness that usually underlay her toughness. When interviewed on her war career, she said, "This is not the work I would have my life judged by." After the final victory, after the crushing blow of the assassination of President Lincoln, she stayed on for a year and a half, seeking to locate missing soldiers for their grieving families, disposing of the stores of medi-

cal supplies, and closing the books on her share of the war.

In the postwar years, Dorothea returned to her mission of creating state hospitals for the insane. By the 1880s she had been instrumental in the establishment of 32 of the 75 state hospitals across the country. She went on lobbying, speaking, and writing for her cause. Although she revisited the South half expecting to be the target of rancorous anti-Northern hostility, she was gratified by an affectionate welcome.

She made her home in the New Jersey State Lunatic Asylum in Trenton, what she called her "first-born" of all the state institutions she had helped to found. When it was built, it contained an apartment for her use whenever she might want it. Others, such as Dixmont Hospital, near Pittsburgh (named, she insisted, for her father, not for her), also contained apartments for her use, but she regarded the Trenton asylum as her home.

It was there in the summer of 1887 that Dorothea Dix lay dying. Early in July, this 85-year-old woman—eager as ever to live each moment fully, no matter how grim—told her physician:

None of those anodynes to dull senses or relieve pain. I want to feel it all. And please tell me when the time is near. I want to know.

On July 17 she died. The marble headstone in Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Mass., is as modest as the Puritan woman could have wished. It carries only her name, not even the dates of her life, much less the world's lavish encomia.

ELMER BENDINER